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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000424

SIPDIS

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DOL/ILAB FOR TINA MCCARTER

STATE FOR SCA/INS, DRL/IL FOR LAUREN HOLT

MCC FOR S GROFF, D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

TREASURY FOR LESLIE HULL

E.O 12958: N/A

TAGS: KWMN PREL PHUM CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: U/S FORE COMMEMORATES INTERNATIONAL WOMENS DAY
BY MEETING WITH WOMEN LEADERS

REF: COLOMBO 285

¶1. SUMMARY: During a March 8 visit to Colombo, Under Secretary for Management Henrietta Fore marked International Women's Day by meeting with a group of leading female entrepreneurs and senior executives. Most participants offered their perspectives on the conflict in Sri Lanka and were unequivocal that resolving the country's civil crisis should be the highest priority. Several said that the moderate, pro-peace ground held by most women is often not heard in public debate. While noting that Sri Lanka is currently posting satisfactory economic growth, the women assessed that higher growth, more foreign direct investment, and broader opportunities for society at large would result if there were peace. Embassy Colombo also commemorated International Women's Day by honoring Post's Sri Lankan nominee for the International Women of Courage Award. End summary.

FEMALE BUSINESS LEADERS SEEK PEACE DIVIDEND

¶2. In Colombo March 8, visiting Under Secretary for Management Henrietta Fore met with a group of leading female entrepreneurs and senior managers representing the banking, insurance, apparel, advertising, trading and consumer services sectors. The event, held on International Women's Day, allowed the discussants to air their political and economic concerns about Sri Lanka. Responding to U/S Fore's question about which social, political and economic issues were most crucial to them, several of the women expressed the need for a stronger political process. They blamed both the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for their roles in Sri Lanka's 25 year-old ethnic conflict. The women felt, however, the LTTE deserved the bulk of the blame for not accepting government negotiating efforts in good faith.

¶3. The CEO of an insurance company said that often the opposing views of the nationalistic Sinhala organizations urging war and the international community calling for a peaceful settlement are loudest, and the middle ground is not heard. Most women, she said, prefer reconciliation to conflict.

¶4. The discussants also believed that businesses could play a supporting role to facilitate peace since they can reach all sectors and regions of Sri Lanka. Businesses might be ideally placed to promote a devolution package by focusing on economic and social benefits, the discussion participants agreed. One woman in the banking sector said there was a problem of public perception, with those seeking a peaceful solution viewed as "soft" on the LTTE. She noted that peace would benefit the whole of Sri Lanka's population, and requested that the Embassy use its influence to help restore law and order in the country.

CROSS-COMMUNITY INTEGRATION NECESSARY

¶5. The female business leaders noted that while there is no glaring discrimination in the corporate sector based on ethnicity, the country should integrate more fully. One executive elaborated, "We should begin to celebrate the different cultures and actively participate in each others' festivals," a practice which is currently not common. U/S Fore encouraged them to begin such activities within their respective companies. Several women also agreed that the use of English as a link language should expand. Speakers described the current segregation of Sinhalese and Tamil communities within the school system, which discourages children from the different communities from mixing. The use of English in classroom instruction could minimize the differences between the ethnicities, the women entrepreneurs believed.

¶6. Note: Most Sri Lankan schools are now segregated by ethnicity and/or religion, with the medium of instruction being the language of the majority at the school. Even in some mixed community schools, there are separate streams for different language speakers. However, the increasing number of private "international schools," generally only available to the middle or upper class, provide

COLOMBO 00000424 002 OF 002

English-medium education where children of all ethnicities mix freely. The government is also attempting to introduce English-medium instruction in more schools to ease the problem in the future. Nevertheless, after several decades of only local language instruction, it may take several more decades to develop a sufficient teaching staff capable of providing adequate English instruction. End Note.

BUSINESSES FILLING SOCIETY'S NEEDS

¶7. A representative of one of Sri Lanka's leading apparel manufacture firms said society should focus more attention on the direct victims of the war, including war widows and their families. She also advocated expanding women's education and economic rights, and described her company's ?Women Go Beyond? program, which is trying to empower its mostly female workforce by identifying each individual's strengths and weaknesses and giving them skills and assistance to enhance their lives. By assisting the workforce, her business has been able to reach families and communities.

¶8. U/S Fore stated that peace is about reaching people's hearts and minds. She said an end to the civil conflict could increase educational opportunities for children and lead to improved living conditions. She asked the group to continue exploring their roles in peace-building and promoting economic growth in Sri Lanka. U/S For affirmed that the USG supports such endeavors, and cited the new Secretary of State's International Women of Courage Award as one type of recognition. She also asked that the discussants encourage other women within their businesses to pursue studies in the US.

AMBASSADOR RECOGNIZES SRI LANKAN WOMEN OF COURAGE NOMINEE

¶9. In another event to commemorate International Women's Day, on March 8, Ambassador Blake recognized the Embassy's Sri Lankan nominee for the Secretary's International Women of Courage Award, Ms. Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena. He presented her with a certificate honoring her as an unstinting advocate for the rule of law, the independence of the Sri Lankan judiciary, and key institutions such as the Human Rights Commission and the National Police Commission. Ambassador Blake commended Ms. Pinto-Jayawardena for raising the profile of human rights protection both in Sri Lanka and internationally. Several dailies covered Pinto-Jayawardena's recognition by the Department of State.

¶10. Under Secretary Fore has cleared on this cable.

BLAKE